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ABSTRACT

Attitudes toward foreign language study of 200 high school students in the Panhandle (northwest) section of Texas were surveyed. In this rural and agricultural area, the percentage of Mexican Americans and Blacks is quite low. Forty-eight percent of the students believed foreign language study was more difficult than other areas, and 57 percent did not think a foreign language would help in their life work. A little more than half of the students thought a study of foreign language would help them understand English better. Students were questioned about who encouraged or discouraged them regarding foreign language study. The attitudes of 56 students who had studied foreign languages in high school are also presented. Over half of the group had studied Spanish; the rest studied Latin and French. Student participation in foreign language clubs and their evaluation of instruction was assessed. The study indicated that most of the high school students were not convinced that foreign language is important to their education, college programs, and life work; and few people, other than foreign language teachers, seem to be encouraging students to enroll in foreign language classes. (SW)

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PANHANDLE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
ATTITUDES TOWARD
FOREIGN LANGUAGE

By

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August, 1978

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FOREWORD

This study was conducted through a graduate course in research methods during the spring of 1978. Some twelve students and I conducted a total of one hundred eighty-five interviews of high school students plus seventeen interviews of recent high school graduates.

We admit a bias in believing all educated people should have a knowledge of at least one foreign language. The data, however, were collected and analyzed in an as objective manner as possible.

Graduate students conducting the interviews and participating in the study were: Mildred Blake, John Copeland, Joe Guthrie, Pamela Hankins, Glyndol Holland, Mary Merchant, Sharon Moore, Sandy Poteet, Nasr Rifat, Charles Shockley, Kerry Swanson and Sharon Wheatley.

I wish to thank Mary Jane Reeves, teacher of Spanish-French-Latin-English, Canyon Independent School District, for reviewing this project, offering encouragement, and making suggestions.

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Canyon, Texas

August, 1978

PANHANDLE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
ATTITUDES TOWARD FOREIGN LANGUAGE

PART I REVIEW OF ALL STUDENTS

The author supervised a study of Texas Panhandle high school students' attitudes toward various curricular areas. This study conducted during the spring term of 1977 indicated these students had the lowest regard for foreign language and the highest for mathematics and English. These results prompted a more careful and intensive study of students' attitudes toward foreign language.

An interview scale (see Appendix) was prepared and the twelve students were instructed on interview techniques. Although the interview scale is similar to a questionnaire, the results are probably more valid since interview methods permit more explanations by the interviewer. Also, interviewees can ask for clarification of questions.

These two hundred two interviewees were not selected by true random techniques; however, these students represented various strata of the Panhandle region of Texas. This group probably represents the attitudes of the area's high school students, at least to a high degree of reliability.

Most research projects have made no attempts to measure students' feelings and attitudes. Perhaps teachers and administrators believe they understand what students think. This researcher believes they often do not, and attempts should be made to find out what students think about various aspects of their learning.

The first section was filled out by students selected at random. The second section, Part II, was completed by only students who had studied a foreign language in high school. These fifty-six students represented some twenty-seven percent of the total.

TABLE I. SEX OF STUDENTS IN THE STUDY

<u>Sex</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Male	46
Female	54

TABLE II. CLASSIFICATION OF STUDENTS

<u>Classification</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Freshmen	4
Sophomores	27
Juniors	34
Seniors	27
High School Graduates	8

TABLE III. AGE OF RESPONDENTS

<u>Age in Years</u>	<u>Percent</u>
15	12
16	31
17	28
18	22
19	6
20 or over	1

TABLE IV. ETHNICITY OF STUDENTS

<u>Race</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Anglo	95
Black	3
Mexican-American	2

Tables I, II, III and IV give information about the two hundred two students interviewed for the study. This distribution indicates a general group which roughly corresponds to the high school population of the region. The original design of the study included a separate

study of Mexican-American students' attitudes, but since the number was so small, no separate analysis was made.

TABLE V. SIZES OF HIGH SCHOOL REPRESENTED

<u>Size of High School</u>	<u>Percent</u>
B(smallest)	18
A	15
AA	11
AAA	10
AAAA	46

Table V shows the sample was chosen from various size school districts. There were possibly too many selected from the smallest school districts to conform to the Panhandle population. The largest districts, AAAA, had the most students in the study, as it should be.

TABLE VI. GRADE AVERAGES OF STUDENTS IN THE SURVEY

<u>Letter Grades</u>	<u>Percent</u>
A	18
A-	15
B	32
B-	15
C	15
C-	4
D	1

The researcher wondered if the best students, grade wise, took foreign languages. Table VI gives the overall grade averages reported by the interviewees. There are no data to compare except to analyze Tables VI and XXV. This comparison indicates students in foreign language classes report making much higher grades.

TABLE VII. MOTHERS WHO STUDIED A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

<u>Answers</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	34
No	39
Unknown	27

Table VII shows the number of mothers who studied a foreign language. It seems, as one would expect, that more mothers studied a foreign language than their offsprings.

TABLE VIII. FATHERS WHO STUDIED A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

<u>Answers</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	29
No	46
Unknown	25

Table VIII suggests fewer fathers than mothers studied a foreign language. It is assumed, without proof, that parents who knew a foreign language would be more likely to encourage their children in this direction.

TABLE IX. FOREIGN LANGUAGES OFFERED IN AREA HIGH SCHOOLS

<u>Foreign Languages</u>	<u>Percent</u>
None	3
Latin	45
French	66
Spanish	78
German	3
Other	2

(This does not add up to 100 percent since some schools offer more than one foreign language)

Table IX reflects the reported offerings in foreign language. As one would expect, Spanish is the dominant foreign language taught in this area. It was surprising, however, to find as much Latin and French. There seems to be a renewed interest in Latin, but it seems to be restricted to the largest high schools.

TABLE X. STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE DIFFICULTY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPARED TO OTHER HIGH SCHOOL SUBJECTS

<u>Students' Views</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Foreign language is more difficult	48
Less difficult	18
About the same	34

One hypothesis of this study was that much of the decline in foreign language study revolved around the students' fear of this subject. It is true that almost a half of these students believed foreign language was more demanding than other subjects; however, about half believed it was not harder.

TABLE XI. STUDENTS' REACTIONS TO THE QUESTION: WILL FOREIGN LANGUAGE HELP YOU IN YOUR LIFE'S WORK?

<u>Answers</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	57
No	43

Table XI revealed that over half of the students believed a foreign language would be helpful to them after school. If this is true, one wonders why more students are not enrolled in these studies.

TABLE XII. STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: WILL FOREIGN LANGUAGE HELP YOU UNDERSTAND ENGLISH BETTER?

<u>Answers</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	53
No	47

One objective often stated by foreign language teachers is that a study of this area will greatly improve ones knowledge of linguistics and English. If this is true, as the researcher believes, this segment of the curriculum is important even if the student never uses the foreign language. Table XII shows that slightly over half of the interviewees believe it is a good objective. Perhaps foreign language teachers, counselors, and others should emphasize this goal.

TABLE XIII. STUDENTS REPORTS AS TO WHO ENCOURAGED THEM TO STUDY A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

<u>Person Who Encouraged</u>	<u>Percent</u>
No one	50
Father	13
Mother	16
Counselor	6
Administrator	2
Other Students	3
Other	10

The questions of who encouraged students in foreign language is perhaps one of the most significant areas of the study. It is interesting, as indicated by Table XIII, that no one encouraged this study to one half of the interviewees. Of the other fifty percent, the mother was most common followed by the father. It may be also significant that few, some eight percent, were encouraged in this direction by counselors and administrators.

TABLE XIV. STUDENTS' REPORTS AS TO WHO DISCOURAGED THEM FROM STUDYING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

<u>Person Who Discouraged</u>	<u>Percent</u>
No one	90
Father	0
Mother	1
Counselor	2
Administrator	0
Other Students	5
Other	2

It seems that very few people, some ten percent as reported in Table XIV, are discouraging students from foreign language. The largest group, five percent,

seems to come from other students. This information suggests there is no significant group working against the foreign language program.

TABLE XV. STUDENTS RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: IS STUDYING A VOCATIONAL SUBJECT MORE IMPORTANT THAN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

<u>Answers</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	77
No	33

As everyone knows, the past few years has seen a great increase in vocational courses. These programs have often been added at the expense of the liberal arts. Table XV suggests that over three-fourths of students surveyed believe studying vocational subjects was more important if a choice has to be made between the two areas. A philosophical problem exists here, and perhaps there will be another swing to the liberal arts and away from vocational emphasis.

TABLE XVI. STUDENTS BELIEF IN THE NECESSITY OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AS A PREREQUISITE TO COLLEGE ENTRANCE

<u>Answer</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	25
No	75

Table XVI reveals that only one-fourth of the students queried believed a foreign language was necessary to gain admission to college. At one time almost all college-bound students were counseled to take a foreign language. This era seems to be a past requirement for most students.

TABLE XVII. STUDENTS' BELIEF OF THE NECESSITY OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE WITHIN THEIR PLANNED COLLEGE PROGRAM

<u>Students' Beliefs</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Will be necessary	24
Will not be necessary	76

Table XVII concerns related information. About one-fourth also believe a foreign language will be necessary within the chosen college degree plan. Apparently, students are realistic about college requirements in the area of foreign language.

TABLE XVIII. STUDENTS' BELIEFS AS TO WHAT CALIBER OF STUDENTS SHOULD STUDY A FOREIGN LANGUAGE.

<u>Students' Beliefs</u>	<u>Percent</u>
None	3
All	24
Upper 3/4	10
Upper 1/2	19
Upper 1/4	14
Other	30

The researcher wondered if high school students viewed foreign language classes as areas for only the brightest students. If this were true, the average and below average students would usually select their electives from another area. Table XVIII shows that about one third of the students believed foreign language was designed for the above average high school scholar.

PART II. STUDENTS ANSWERING THESE QUESTIONS REPRESENTED FIFTY-SIX STUDENTS WHO HAD STUDIED A FOREIGN LANGUAGE.

TABLE XIX. FOREIGN LANGUAGES TAKEN BY THIS GROUP

<u>Foreign Language</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Spanish	56
French	20
Latin	27
German	1
Other	1

(The total is 105% since a few students took more than one foreign language).

Table XIX gives the distribution of languages studied in the Texas Panhandle. Spanish is, of course, the language most often chosen with Latin and French far behind.

TABLE XX. LENGTH OF TIME FOREIGN LANGUAGE WAS TAKEN

	<u>Percent</u>
One year or less	55
Two years	29
Three years	11
Four years	5

Table XX would suggest that much of foreign language was taken a short time. It should be noted, however, that some of the students reporting "one year or less" are still in high school, and some will continue the foreign language. The students seem to know, see also Table XXVI, that three or four years are necessary to learn a language. It would seem ideal if high schools would offer and students would take four years of a language.

TABLE XXI. STUDENTS' REPORT ON METHODS THEIR TEACHERS USED.

<u>Methods</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Reading and Writing	7
Mostly Reading with Some Oral	13
About half Reading & half Oral-Aural	72
Oral-Aural mostly	4
Other	4

At one time almost all high schools taught foreign languages with little concern of listening and speaking skills. Most students, 72 percent reported in Table XXI, are studying by both reading and oral-aural methods.

Several years ago foreign language scholars believed more emphasis on oral-aural techniques would encourage more students to study a foreign language. Although this approach is probably best, it has not encouraged many more students to enroll.

TABLE XXII. STUDENTS PARTICIPATION IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLUB

<u>Participation</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Did Participate	43
Did Not	57

Foreign language clubs are often organized to put some fun into this area of the curriculum. Table XXIII shows that over half of this group did not participate in clubs. Of course, in many schools, clubs were not available. Teachers' busy schedules, students' work outside school, bussing schedules, and other problems make clubs difficult if not impossible.

TABLE XXIII. STUDENTS' EVALUATIONS OF INSTRUCTION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE

<u>Ratings</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Poor	0
Below Average	11
Average	46
Above Average	33
Superior	10

Foreign language classes cannot depend upon captive students as in history, English, mathematics and other required subjects. Although all good teachers are obviously the goal, it is even more important for foreign language teachers to be highly regarded by students. Table XXIII shows that only eleven percent of the students surveyed rated teachers as below average and not one rated the foreign language teacher as poor.

TABLE XXIV. WHO MOTIVATED THESE STUDENTS TO STUDY
A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

<u>Motivators</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Mother	16
Father	10
Other Student	0
Teacher	9
Counselor	12
Administrator	5
Interest & Self Evaluation of Need	27
Other	21

The study wanted to know what or who influenced foreign language students. Table XXIV suggests that most were motivated by self diagnosed need and interest. People most influential were mother, counselor, father, and a teacher in that order. It is interesting that no one mentioned being motivated by another student.

TABLE XXV. STUDENTS REPORTED GRADE AVERAGES IN
FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

<u>Grade Averages</u>	<u>Percent</u>
A	40
A-	15
B	26
B-	11
C	2
C-	2
D	4
F	0

As mentioned earlier, grade averages reported in foreign language classes were above average. One could jump to the conclusion that foreign language teachers are easy graders but the most reasonable conclusion is that students who elect these courses tend to be better qualified academically.

TABLE XXVI. STUDENTS' BELIEFS ON THE AMOUNT OF
FOREIGN LANGUAGE NEEDED TO INSURE A
GOOD COMMAND OF THE LANGUAGE.

<u>Number of Years</u>	<u>Percent</u>
One Year	4
Two Years	17
Three Years	33
Four or More Years	46

Most students in foreign language classes seem well aware that mastery cannot be achieved in the short time of a year or two. Perhaps many students have become disillusioned when they realize they could not converse or understand native speakers after a year or two of study. Counselors should educate all students on the need of a long period of study necessary for any reasonable mastery of a language.

TABLE XXVII. REASONS SEVENTEEN STUDENTS STOPPED TAKING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

<u>Reasons</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Didn't like it	18
Didn't like the teacher	18
Too Hard	6
Interfered with Vocational Program	0
Interfered with Athletics	0
School Stopped Offering It	6
Other Reasons	52

Seventeen of the fifty-six students had dropped the subject. Follow up studies have usually emphasized the graduates, or successes. More emphasis should be placed on failures or drop outs. Answers given, see

Table XXVII, were somewhat disappointing and vague. "Didn't like the teacher" or "didn't like the subject" seemed to be the major reasons for withdrawal. Only six percent stated it was too hard.

Two hypotheses tested were: (1) Many will drop foreign language because it will interfere with athletics, and (2) some will drop because of conflicts with vocational programs. Table XXVII shows no student listed either reason.

Much more study is needed to determine why students do not take a foreign language and why many, if not most, drop out after a year or less.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A sophisticated statistician may not approve of the techniques used in this study but the researcher believes some new information is obtained that will merit study by curriculum planners, counselors, and teachers.

As in most research projects, this study raises more questions than it provides answers.

Although it may be a simplistic answer, it is apparent that the rise in vocational programs has correlate closely with the decline in foreign language enrollments.

The same causes may have resulted in both rather than increased vocational choices causing the demise of many foreign language classes.

Some suggestions are:

- (1) Don't assume you know what students think and feel; make efforts to find out in an organized way.
- (2) Make careful studies of why students do not take foreign languages.
- (3) Study particularly students who drop out of foreign language classes.
- (4) Write many articles for the local papers extolling the values of foreign language.
- (5) Court the support of counselors, administrators, and fellow teachers. Remember that most of them have not studied a foreign language.
- (6) In spite of the demands, try to organize or improve a foreign language club.
- (7) Work on getting the foreign language students to recruit others. Students reportedly listen to one another.
- (8) Be especially diligent in making your classes exciting, varied, and interesting.
- (9) Work with parents who apparently have a great deal of influence as to what subjects their children elect.
- (10) Emphasize the long term values of foreign language (versus some short term values of vocational programs)

APPENDIX
INTERVIEW SCALE USED IN THE STUDY

A SURVEY OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES
TOWARD FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES

We are attempting to study students' attitudes toward foreign language in high school. There are no right or wrong answers; we want to know your feelings about foreign language. You will not be identified in any way.

Part I For All Students

1. Your sex? ☐ male ☐ female
2. Your classification? ☐ sophomore ☐ junior ☐ senior
3. Age? ☐ 13 or younger ☐ 14 ☐ 15 ☐ 16 ☐ 17 ☐ 18
☐ 19 ☐ 20 or over
4. Race? ☐ Anglo ☐ Black ☐ Mexican American
☐ other _____.
5. What is the size of your high school?(UIL Classification)
☐ B ☐ A ☐ AA ☐ AAA ☐ AAAA
6. What is your overall grade average in high school?
☐ A ☐ A- ☐ B ☐ B- ☐ C ☐ C- ☐ D ☐ F
7. Did your mother study a foreign language?
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know
8. Father? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know
9. Does your school offer foreign languages? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, which ones: ☐ Latin ☐ French ☐ Spanish
☐ German ☐ other _____.
10. How difficult is studying a foreign language compared to other high school courses?
11. Do you believe knowing a foreign language will help you in your life's work? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Explain your answer.

12. Do you think knowing a foreign language will help you understand English better? ☐ Yes ☐ No
13. Has anyone encouraged you to study foreign language? ☐ yes
☐ No If yes, who?
14. Has anyone discouraged you? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, who and why?
15. Is studying vocational subjects more important to you than studying a foreign language (if you had to choose)?
☐ Yes ☐ No Explain.
16. Is a foreign language necessary to get into college?
☐ yes ☐ No Explain.
17. If you plan to go to college, will you have to study a foreign language in the program you plan to take? ☐ Yes ☐ NO
Explain.
18. What type of high school students should study a foreign language?
☐ None ☐ all ☐ upper 3/4 ☐ upper half
☐ upper quarter ☐ other _____.
19. Add any other comments about foreign language not covered by the above _____

Part II For Students who have taken a Foreign Language.

If you are taking or have taken a foreign language in high school, complete the following.

22. What language have you taken ☐ Spanish ☐ French ☐ Latin
☐ German ☐ Russian ☐ Other _____.
23. For how long? ☐ 1 year or less ☐ 2 years ☐ 3 years
☐ 4 years or more

24. What methods did the teacher use?
☐ reading & writing ☐ oral-aural mostly
☐ mostly reading with some oral
☐ about half reading & writing and half oral-aural
☐ other _____
25. Did you participate in a foreign language club? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, describe it and your evaluation.
26. How do you evaluate instruction in the foreign language?
☐ Poor ☐ Below average ☐ Average ☐ Above average
☐ Superior
27. Who and what motivated you to take foreign language?
28. What grade average did you have in your foreign language class?
☐ A ☐ A- ☐ B ☐ B- ☐ C ☐ C- ☐ D ☐ F
29. How much foreign language do you believe one needs to have a good command of it?
☐ 1 year ☐ 2 years ☐ 3 years ☐ 4 or more years
30. If you have stopped taking a foreign language, why did you discontinue it?
31. Add any other comments concerning the foreign language you are taking or have taken.

Thank you for your help and cooperation.